



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2015

Review of Adams, Samuel L., Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea

Altmann, Peter

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-115780>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Altmann, Peter (2015). Review of Adams, Samuel L., Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea.
Journal of Hebrew Scriptures:online.

Adams, Samuel L., *Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014). Pp. 268. Paperback. US\$35.00. ISBN 978-664-23703-5.

As part of a new subfield within biblical studies, Adams's *Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea* provides an overview and analysis of a cross-section of economic topics that pervade the social world of biblical texts from the Persian Period to the New Testament and rabbinic works. In addition to the brief introduction, conclusion, and indices, the volume comprises five chapters. The first four, "Family Life and Marriage," "The Status of Women and Children," "Work and Financial Exchanges," and "Taxation and the Role of the State" provide historical investigations moving from the most intimate to the broadest of contexts. The final chapter, "The Ethics of Wealth and Poverty" moves book-by-book through Jewish wisdom literature, identifying the overlapping and divergent views on economic concerns from Proverbs to *4QInstruction*, the Gospel of Luke, and others. Perhaps the clearest statement of the volume's thesis is as follows: "In assessing all of this material, we will point to persistent stratification in Judah, with most households engaging in farming pursuits under challenging conditions" (p. 7, cf. the similar statement on p. 1). Adams goes on to show the connection between this situation and the social visions of biblical and other texts.

The main body begins with "Family Life and Marriage," which I find to be a very appropriate starting point for ancient economies. As Adams repeatedly and correctly points out, this was the primary economic setting for *most* people in Judea and elsewhere during these centuries. His basic argument in this chapter is that marriage was very closely tied to economics in the ancient world. In this analysis, Adams more or less assumes a stable family structure during the entire period, which includes many similarities with the patrimonial structure of the preexilic era, though some development and change did take place. Even with large estates and land seizures becoming more commonplace in the Ptolemaic and Seleucid periods, the basic household structure continued into the Roman period (though leaving aspects like the link to the clan behind; cf. pp. 12–13). The discussion moves on to address matters like population, life span, and family size, which the author demonstrates to be very important economic concerns. In addition, Adams makes the important distinction between the more developed, populous, and commercial regions along the coast and the interior regions, which lagged behind in these regards. This conclusion dispels the notion of uniform growth in the region during this long period.

The most insightful section of this chapter consists of his discussion of the economic concerns involved in choices of marriage partners. Adams details the economic reasons for endogamy, relating Ezra 9–10, Neh 13, Ruth, and Tobit with the sociological conclusions by Lévi-Strauss (and others) and the very relevant marriage contracts from Elephantine. What emerges is the considerable importance of property rights in the biblical texts that ban intermarriage so that "...one cannot separate the sacred and mundane aspects of marriage/divorce" (p. 39).

The second chapter retains a synchronic perspective and narrows even further, providing an economic viewpoint on the women's and children's roles. Adams argues, "Despite a hierarchical framework in which women and children faced many challenges and often found themselves on the margins, the evidence suggests that many of them made important contributions to the economy and had more public lives than some of the sources suggest ..." (p. 42). He lays out the significance of women's role as food preparers, and textiles is another realm in which women contributed significantly. Adams shows how the economics of the dowry, the status of widows, and concerns around inheritance (pp. 51–58) shed significant light on the narratives of Ruth and Tamar (Gen 38), as well as some of the diachronic changes

that may have taken place by the time of the New Testament and rabbinic writings. His investigation of the economic roles of children helps a modern audience grasp some of the details of a drastically different culture. He lays out clearly the difficulties confronting daughters and their families in negotiating the years prior to marriage (pp. 68–69), such that daughters were often betrothed even before puberty because, “Early betrothal increased the number of years that a wife could contribute healthy labor to her new household, and perhaps more important, it provided a longer window for childbirth” (p. 72). Economics indeed interacted deeply with the social and religious fabric of Judean culture.

Chapter 3, “Work and Financial Exchanges,” begins with farming, as it should for ancient Judea. Adams paints a bleak picture in which farming families were confronted with regular drought, locust infestation, considerable indebtedness, and heavy taxation. This contrasts diametrically to the bountiful description in, e.g., theologically loaded Deut 8:8–9. More pressing, I wonder how this relates especially to the wheat and oil exports from Judah and Israel to Tyre in Ezek 27:17? Perhaps the difficulties were greater from the period of Ptolemaic rule onward, for these rulers took a more active role in controlling the region (p. 89).

Adams then turns to other occupations, but his caution reminds the reader that the amount of trade was limited, given Judea's inland location (p. 93). This helps to check overly modernist and capitalist judgments, and the mention of Karl Polanyi in this context supports Adams's concern. Furthermore, merchants were viewed with skepticism, which Adams clearly illustrates with a text from Ben Sira (Sir 26:29–27:2). Yet, coinage and trade do begin to blossom in these centuries, so the discussion (pp. 99–103) seems invariably short and could have done more to reflect on how this change was part of the Second Temple economy. On the other hand, Adams's investigation of interest, jubilee, and debt is more thorough. He tracks the various laws on interest in the Pentateuch, comparing them also with Neh 5, Philo, New Testament texts, the Damascus Document, and Josephus. He also compares various biblical and Qumran wisdom texts on the related topic of surety, which allows for a lively juxtaposition, especially between the seeming opposites of surety and charity (that are more similar in motivation in some texts than one might expect; cf. p. 121).

“Taxation and the Role of the State,” the fourth chapter, takes a different tack than the others by proceeding diachronically through the various regimes—Persian, Ptolemaic, Seleucid, Hasmonean, and Roman. Nonetheless, Adams sees consistency based on cross-cultural analysis in terms of heavy taxation of the agrarian Judean economy by foreign rulers (p. 128). Herodotus's problematic story of Darius's tax reorganization (*Hist.* 3.89–97) provides the essential basis for description of the Persian taxation system. Adams does note the importance of tax revenue for the rhetoric of Ezra 4, however, which shows the significance of economics for the empire (or at least it is projected to be important for the empire by this text!). The Zeno papyri and Qoheleth provide more solid footing for the consideration of Judea in the Ptolemaic period, which was more tightly controlled at this time than under the Persians (pp. 147–48). I was surprised that Adams leaves out mention of the Ptolemaic devaluation of their coins (changing the weight), seemingly to make it impractical for silver to cross the border into Seleucid territory. While the Seleucid and Hasmonean periods are viewed more in terms of political history, Adams is able to provide more detail on taxes and the state under the Romans. Herod's building projects and related land taxes, the census, sales tax, and poll taxes help show the texture of state finances at this time.

The final chapter of the body turns to “The Ethics of Wealth and Poverty.” Its focus is on the more directly ethical texts of Proverbs, Job, Ben Sira, Qoheleth, Luke, and *4QInstruction*. The discussion moves diachronically and outlines a generally accepted intellectual-religious development within Judean wisdom thought. Beginning with the present-world focus of


Proverbs with its predominant view of a close connection between an act and its consequences, Israelite-Judean wisdom then calls this into question in the works of Job and Qoheleth. Ben Sira affirms and brings these viewpoints together. Unlike Ben Sira, *4QInstruction*, the Epistle of Enoch, and Luke move repayment for good deeds out of the earthly sphere and into the afterlife; poverty becomes a virtue.

The volume represents a considerable accomplishment in providing an overview of economic dynamics in Judea over a period of more than half a millennium. By addressing such a significant period of time, Adams is able to provide a broad arc, putting economic details into a wide-reaching context. Because economics has rarely held the focus of scholars of biblical and related texts or of ancient historians and archaeologists, Adams maps out the important themes for the discussion. The strength of the book lies in the two chapters that discuss the economics of the family. These two chapters engage helpful extrabiblical texts and sociological comparisons that bring insight to the biblical material.

Because it covers such a long period of time during which considerable economic developments took place, there are invariably topics that receive short shrift. The detailed work of Michael Jursa on the Babylonian economy during this period might have provided an important comparative given the contact between Babylonia and Judea at least during the Persian period, even though they were vastly different economies.[1] A second omission is in the way of methodology. Considerable disagreements over Polanyian, modernist, and Marxist (to name the classic three) methodologies to ancient economies have raged over the past decades, but these are hardly present in Adams's presentation. While one may quibble over many details, as a volume that provides a worthy introduction to the subfield of economics in ancient Judea, some basic definitions and discussion of his approach to ancient economics would be helpful. On a different note, there is a persistent theme throughout the volume that life was always hard economically for the majority of people (e.g., p. 46). This contention is in large part only supported in detail by the sociological comparisons from Lenski and Eisenstadt (pp. 129–30). These two sources are quite broad and have come under critique in their application to biblical studies.[2] Future works might also include more archaeological discussion.

These critiques are generally the kind that are bound to accompany an investigation that marks out new territory; there are many more directions to be pursued, but Adams has done a courageous and exemplary job in making a beginning. His work gives the scholarly community a thoughtful synthesis and is therefore a necessary resource amenable for investigation of economic questions in Second Temple Judea by scholars and students alike.

Peter Altmann, University of Zürich

[1] For example, Michael Jursa, *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC: Economic Geography, Economic Mentalities, Agriculture, the Use of Money and the Problem of Economic Growth* (AOAT, 377; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010). 

[2] See the general critique of the “rural poor” in Walter J. Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament* (LHBOTS, 426; London: T & T Clark, 2006); most extreme is Philippe Guillaume, *Land, Credit, and Crisis: Agrarian Finance in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Equinox, 2012), 152.

